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ABSTRACT

Reactions of foster children to separation from their families of origin were identified from case materials of 36 Canadian protective service workers. A broad range of reactions was apparent. Discussion focuses on anxiety, regression, physiological symptoms, denial of feelings, persistent attachment to rejecting or unreliable parents, rebellious behavior, delayed expression of feelings, vulnerability to subsequent separations, and self-blame regarding foster status. Concluding discussion briefly addresses the issues of age differences in separation reactions, coping mechanisms and their consequences, and the implications of the observations for Bowlby's theory of separation anxiety and Erikson's model of individual development. (RH)

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THE SEPARATION EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER CHILDREN

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Paper given at American Orthopsychiatric Association Annual Meeting, New York City, March 31-April 4, 1989 as part of panel "The Impact of Foster Care on Foster Children's Sense of Security"

Introduction

Recognized theories of attachment/separation (Bowlby 1973) and self-concept (Rosenberg 1979) indicate children's relationships with their families of origin are central to their psychosocial development. Yet, there is little empirical research about foster children's relationships with their birth families. Social workers generally subscribe to the belief that foster children require help in understanding separation and its effects on them. A recent Canadian study, one of the few empirical studies of child welfare practice indicates, however, that these beliefs are often not implemented (Kufeldt et al. 1989). We need to enrich our knowledge of children's reactions to separation with more empirical findings from practice.

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Methodology

The following material was gathered from the caseloads of thirty-six protective service workers, in five geographical locations, involving two Children's Aid Societies (CASs) in Southern Ontario: one in a large city (two million); the other covering a smaller city (one-quarter million) and the adjoining rural county. Two of the geographic locations served large ethnic communities, mainly Italian and Portuguese.

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As the children's experiences were processed and communicated to the researcher by the social workers, their training and experience is also relevant. As a group, the workers could be expected to be fairly sensitive to separation dynamics, and therefore able to identify such issues with children on their caseloads. A majority (55%) had at least two years' experience in a child placement agency; 79% had university degrees in social work (compared to 50% for front-line Children's Aid Society (CAS) workers across Ontario at the time); they were also given 16 hours of separation training before being asked to identify and audiotape a case discussion that demonstrated their interventions to help a foster child with reactions to being separated from his/her family.

The segments of the case material quoted below are the comments of workers to their supervisors. Minor editing has been done for clarity and the children's names have been changed.

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO SEPARATION

A broad range of separation reactions was identified by the workers of the children in this study. These included anxiety, regression, physiological symptoms, denial of feelings, persistent attachment to rejecting or unreliable parents, rebellious behaviour, delayed expression of feelings, vulnerability to subsequent separations, self-blame re foster status, and conflicting loyalties between foster and birth parents.

Anxiety

Bowlby (1973) discusses separation anxiety as a natural accompaniment of children leaving their parents, giving such simple examples as young children venturing out from parents to explore a new play area, then running back when they suddenly realize they are alone. He points out the importance to the child of knowing the parent is there and, consequently, the problems arising when children are separated from parents by external intervention before they are ready for independence.

> Nancy, eighteen months, showed distress in her new foster home by excessive whining and clinging to any adult who showed affection to her. She would venture only a small distance before coming back to cling, apparently needing reassurance that the adult would not leave her. As Nancy's worker said,"If you try to put her down eventually, she keeps clinging to you."

Nancy's behaviour fits with Bowlby's observation that children beginning to explore the world independently should ideally be supported by the presence of a trusted adult who does not press them to separate but leaves them to move out on their own initiative. He concludes from observing children, in day nurseries and foster care, that forced separation can make them excessively dependent on parent figures.

Regression

Very young children, in anxiety-producing situations, tend to regress to behaviour characteristic of an earlier stage of development. Behavioural regression at a time of stress is understandable in view of Erikson's work on developmental stages

(1963). Children require a secure environment in which to progress through each developmental stage; lacking this they are vulnerable to remaining at a stage where they experienced more security.

> Carolyn, 3, regressed in her toilet training when placed in a foster home; she began soiling and wetting her pants. Her worker had "a great deal of difficulty impressing on the foster mother that this is not that bad, that it is Carolyn's reaction to all she has been through."

From Erikson's perspective, Carolyn's behavioural regression is a normal reaction to the insecurity of an unfamiliar home. It appears to have been frustrating to her foster parents, however, as they found it difficult to accept the worker's suggestion that Carolyn was still anxious about the move to their home.

Physiological Symptoms

Another type of defensive reaction, similar to regression, but more common in older children, was the apparent conversion of separation feelings to physical symptoms.

> Wendy, 16, had just been moved to a new foster home, and was described by her (male) worker as showing "all sorts of reactions. She's been sick, she's reacted in a hysterical way, she's had fainting spells, vomitted, without any physical reason being found. She spent a week in a psychiatric ward. The doctor feels that she has emotional problems mostly due to her past, not necessarily to this particular separation. She's had many moves in the past starting from when she was very young and she's not able to get close to people."

The psychiatrist's interpretation of Wendy's distress as related to past separations and her inability to get close to

people' is based on dynamics very familiar to child placement workers. It seems that Wendy, like the younger children mentioned above, was traumatized by a change in homes, and her feelings were converted into physical symptoms.

Denial of Feelings

Some workers tried to get children to discuss their feelings about separation and were met by denial on the part of the child.

> Ron's worker's expresssed concern to his supervisor about Ron's possible reaction to being abandoned by his mother. He tried to "approach him on how he felt about Mother leaving. Ron said that Mother didn't leave him...she had to go somewhere else."

Ron pretended his mother's absence was outside her control, probably because he did not want to face the pain connected with rejection or abandonment. It is difficult to know whether Ron may have been reacting defensively to an implied criticism of his mother, because we do not know the worker's words or tone; but it is clear that at some level he needs to feel his mother did not want to leave him. In one sense this need can be supported: no parent **wants** to abandon a child, although some do leave their children in an way that is deemed irresponsible by society.

Persistent Attachment to Rejecting or Unreliable Parents

Some children and adolescents in care have parents who show them little affection or concern, or make promises they fail to keep. The parents may even display open rejection of their child,

by making hurtful comments. Yet the child may seem attached to such parents despite their neglect or rejection, and workers fear the effects of this unreciprocated attachment on the child's self-image.

> Otto, 15, was told by his father (as paraphrased by the worker), "'I don't want to be seen as your father at this point, that is I won't accept you back at home, but we can be friends.' Otto was ten feet off the ground! That was the best thing he could hear!". On Otto's next arranged home visit, however, his father was absent. "He was down low after that visit, saying 'What the heck am I getting here?' You know (worker's view) I thought we were getting somewhere, but now Father's done the same thing he did before".

The worker's concluding comment indicates his disillusionment about the value of continuing to work on Otto's relationship to his father. Otto was also hurt by his father's failure to be present for his visit, but he was probably far from ready to give up on his father. The worker's report that Otto reacted so joyfully to his father's categorical offer of 'friendship', suggests his desire to continue some relationship is very strong.

Rebellious Behaviour

Adolescents who had behaved co-operatively with workers while still in their own homes could become management problems very quickly in foster care.

> Naomi, 15, came into the office on her own initiative to request foster placement. As her worker said, "Her feelings about coming into care changed after she got into the foster home. Then a number of runs started occurring. Each time, the police or night duty worker would pick her up, then I would get

> involved. Her cooperation slowly started to dwindle and her attitude became, 'I don't want to cooperate with you, I don't want to talk to you'."

Naomi's behaviour could be analyzed psychodynamically as follows. Her request for admission to care was an expression of rebellion against the authority of her birth family, an exaggeration of normal self-asssertion in adolescence. Once in care, her rebellion against authority from her birth family was transferred to the foster family. Again this could be seen as an extreme example of asserting her independence, a normal developmental stage, but aggravated by the complexities of having two families. As described earlier, emotional separation from parents cannot be achieved simply by a physical move; such a move may well intensify the struggle for an independent identity, as an adolescent attempts to relate to two families.

Some children had presented some behaviour problems over the years, but became more rebellious upon reaching adolescence. Their behaviour was sometimes attributed by their workers to unresolved separation conflicts.

> Steven came into care at age 3 and experienced many placement changes. By age 17, he had developed serious behaviour problems and came before the juvenile court. His worker connected his problems with the earlier separation and feelings of rejection: "Steven has able to sit on things for ten to fourteen years...now he's just lost complete control. He has been in detention three times in three months, and has been moved to five different places in three months. He ran from all of them, was involved in two car thefts, drugs, homosexuality. Yet, up until that time he was perfect. He was going to concerts, theatres, then the past three months everything went downhill".
>
> During the "ten to fourteen years" when Steven was assessed as holding back his feelings, he was in a

> series of foster and adoptive placements. As the worker said, "The last home was very rigid; they kept him really in a straight line and he ran from that. It's been downhill since". After his 'run', Steven was moved to a group home to avoid further placement breakdowns; it was then his behaviour rapidly began to deteriorate.

In the more open atmosphere of the group home, it is probable that Steven no longer needed to repress his separation feelings, so he began to ask questions of his worker.

> In terms of Steven's questions, the worker noted, "Steven didn't even know his mother and didn't know why he was in care. Nobody told him anything about his past". Consequently Steven "thought every placement breakdown was because of him. Nobody bothered to tell him that some homes closed, that some parents decided they didn't want to adopt at the last minute".

The above comments suggest that Steven's worker thought he would benefit from knowing more about his past, and she did appear to view his rebellious behaviour as being rooted in his separation experience. Yet she made no reference to her own interaction with Steven, nor to any attempt to meet his requests for knowledge about the past.

Delayed Expression of Feelings

The above case of Steven illustrates, as well as rebellious behaviour, the long passage of time before some children showed open concern about the separations they experienced. The externalizing of such feelings often coincided with another move or a crisis in the child's environment.

> Donna, 16, lived in a group home for a year before expressing feelings about being separated from her family. As her worker said, "She just 'blew' one night. It was brought on by something the other kids

> in the house were going through...and all Donna's feelings are coming out, so we're dealing with them".

The lapse of a year for Donna, and much longer for Steven, suggests children tend to repress their feelings about separation. The worker's use of the expression "blew" suggests she perceived Donna having pent up feelings for some time. Yet the worker made no mention of trying to elicit these feelings earlier. It seems that a crisis will tap buried feelings in adolescents who have been traumatized by separation; it would seem important to attempt to discuss separation feelings without waiting for a crisis to uncover them.

Vulnerability to Subsequent Separations

As just noted, a crisis in the life of a foster child may reactivate feelings about an earlier separation. This is particularly likely when the crisis is another move, as shown in Steven's case above. Workers tend to expect this when the move is brought about by a problem in the child's relationship with the foster family; but they may not be as prepared when the move is required because of circumstances external to the child or adolescent.

> Marion, 17, had been moved from an agency-operated group home because it was closing. Her worker commented, "Now she is going through the whole thing about separating from her family, just blowing wide open... feelings that she's been sitting on for a year... It seems to have hit her the same as leaving her family; all of a sudden these people are leaving her and she's alone again. They had a blow up in the house one night and everything came out... All of a sudden she feels it's happening to her again and she's got no control".

Marion's vulnerability is aggravated by her sense of losing control over her life. Such a feeling is particularly difficult in view of adolescent development concerns: in the normal course of events, adolescents are seeking to gain control over their lives by becoming autonomous from their birth families. Marion apparently had no family from whom to seek independence and this may have contributed to her feelings of helplessness.

Self-Blame regarding Foster Status

Some children failed to understand why they were in care. Either it had not been explained, or they had not accepted the explanation. They tended to blame themselves, in the absence of other reasons.

> Lorna, 13, revealed fears to her worker that persisted from the time of her admission to care four years earlier. She recalled being placed in a foster home directly from a court hearing, and being told this placement would only be 'for the weekend'. Lorna said "nobody told her anything for months, so she was forced to draw her own conclusions...now Lorna thinks it is her fault that she isn't home." Both worker and supervisor agreed that Lorna's interpretation was "a very destructive explanation" for her.

As implied by the worker and supervisor, Lorna's self-blame about her placement was likely to be "destructive" to her. In the absence of another explanation, she assumed she must be somehow at fault for having caused the placement. In the absence of information about their past, children tend to explain their life events in terms that suggest they have some control, i.e. that the move occurred because of their own behaviour. Lorna's self-

image is likely to be damaged by her sense of having caused the separation from her family.

It is possible that Lorna's claim that her admission to care was initially explained as a very brief, temporary arrangement may be a distortion of reality; in the author's experience, however, workers sometimes try to minimize the separation in this way. Also, as noted by Fanshel, many placements that are intended to be short-term, drift on much longer than expected (1978).

DISCUSSION

The above case excerpts provide some insight into children's reactions to foster placement and their workers' responses. Many of the children showed separation anxiety, regressing to behaviour normally seen in younger children, developing psychosomatic symptoms, or being overly dependent on adults. With older children, unmet dependency needs were shown in their denial of abandonment, or persistent attachment to parents who had hurt them.

Other reactions to separation included fear, confusion and resentment. Some children and adolescents acted out their feelings directly, through rebellious behaviour; this seems to be a healthier response than repression, yet it carries the risk of being rejected by foster parents and experiencing serial replacements. On the other hand, there was evidence that many children suppressed their separation reactions for years.

Delayed reactions to separation often surfaced during the developmental crises of adolescence, by which time the worker who knew their parents and brought them into care was usually long gone. Many children in the study had also experienced a series of placement changes, before and during agency care. In attempting to understand their separation experiences, children and adolescents often blamed themselves for the loss of their families and subsequent moves. This is an understandable reaction in children who undergo traumatic changes that they are powerless to control. By rationalizing that they have been responsible for causing these changes, they can deny their vulnerability to the continuing threat of unforeseen changes in their lives.

The separation reactions observed in the children and adolescents described above fit with Bowlby's theory of separation anxiety, as well as being consistent with Erikson's model in terms of the interruption of developmental stages. The tendency for foster children to blame themselves for the separations they have experienced has implications for intervention. Child placement workers need to provide information about the separation, to counteract children's tendency to assume blame. This can be an important influence in maintaining self esteem for children who have to be separated from their families.

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